

10 Tools for Audience Development

By Donna Walker-Kuhne, Joseph Papp Public Theater

You must begin with a vision. During one of my first meetings with George Wolfe, Producer at The Public Theater, he shared his vision. He said, "I want to create a theater that looks and feels like New York City and this country. That's as simple as it is. People might call it multiculturalism or diversity. To me, it's just creating theater that looks and feels like the people we serve."

The night following my meeting with George, I had a dream that I can, to this day, still see vividly. It was set in the lobby of the public. It was a brightly lit party. There were people from all different walks of life, from neighborhoods throughout New York City, as well as from all over the World. They were speaking many different languages, but their common bond was joyous laughter and the sharing of a good time. That vision remains the daily motivation for my work.

An effective audience development initiative begins with a vision. What do you need to make it happen? Write it down. Review it. With whom do you share this vision? The answer to the last question is critical, as explained by one arts institution director quoted in the Lila Wallace-Readers' Digest Fund publication, *Opening the Door to the Entire Community: How Museums Are Using Permanent Collections to Engage Audiences*:

"Charting a new course for audience development can't just be the passion of a museum's director or its Marketing or education department. It requires the commitment of the entire institution to conduct business in new ways that reach far beyond the walls of the museum."

Another wonderful example is the Old Town School of Folk Music in Chicago. I believe the former Executive Director, Jim Hirsch exemplifies a true visionary. Hirsch became aware that with the changing Demographics of the City of Chicago, 20 years ago, specifically, in the Latino and African American audiences, expanding the Marketing efforts as essential to its growth. Hirsch was also aware that many arts organizations were using outreach to get involved in communities of color and the bulk of this effort was underwritten by grants. In his model, he used consistent Marketing tools and long range thinking for expanding his audience. He also made a 20-25 year commitment to accomplish this goal.

The steps incorporated into his institution include, targeted programming for Latino communities including bi-lingual Marketing materials, ads in local Spanish media, and flyer distribution in the neighborhood. He created a Community Outreach department and developed community ambassadors to build contacts, share dialogue and make recommendations for programs. Hirsch notes an important lesson learned - "executing a diversity plan in one community does not always translate exactly to every other Target community. The principles of sensitivity, respect, open-mindedness, risk taking are fundamental to audience development. Having someone on staff who is permanently responsible for diversity is a necessity - it helps to institutionalize the effort and keep all staff on board and sensitized to this commitment".

*Note: The story of the Old Town School of Folk Music, along with the diversity efforts of five other Chicago-based arts groups can be found in the publication *Diversifying Chicago's Arts Audiences* (the Arts Marketing Center of the Arts & Business Council of Chicago, 2000).*

Diversifying Chicago's Arts Audiences is available for purchase through ArtsMarketing.org's Product Storefront

Tools for Building Audiences

Let's talk about the specific tools that will enable this process. Framing these tools is the art of listening. As Stephen Covey, author of *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, says, "Listening is more important than asking questions". Successful audience development requires that we talk to our potential audience, hear what they have to say and incorporate their ideas into the work of our institutions. I believe the art of listening is also extending the utmost respect to everyone you are speaking to.

1. Investment

To invest in the process means providing the resource, staff and budgets to Support this effort. It also means that you recognize it is a long-term process and with a solid investment of resources and creativity, it will translate into amazing results.

2. Commitment

Commitment to this process is essential, particularly when working with a small budget and minimal resources (staff, time and product). You must also be creative, tenacious and focused. Having a passion is imperative.

3. Research

This is the most important component and it never stops. There are several types of research necessary to embark on this effort. Quantitative, which tells us the numbers and percentages of ticket buyers, and specifically reports on buying habits providing statistics we can interpret. Qualitative research, speaks to how and why a particular audience member responds to cultural product.

When we engage in oral research, it is important to consider how we ask the questions and how we hear the answers. One of the first steps is to find out how people perceive your product. How do you Prepare yourself to ask the question? First, you need to acknowledge to yourself that you don't have the answer. That's okay. Secondly, you are asking from a place of sincerity, genuine interest and compassion. There is no need for guilt or recrimination. The answer to your questions may not be true. But that's irrelevant. The point is that it's their perception and that's our starting point.

4. Review and analysis

Once you've completed your research, the next step is review and analysis. What Opportunities can you create internally to manifest these plans? The review and analysis phase underscores why it is so important to have institutional Support so that you can actually create the programs and events, such as discounts, free events, or utilizing other internal resources, to attract a broader audience.

5. Follow up

After you've conducted your research, listened to respondents and assessed the data, give it legs! Discuss internally what you can do, what baby steps you can take that will signal to these communities: "I hear you", "let's try this" or "what do you think?" Then go back to the people with whom you met to discuss your ideas. If nothing happens as a result of the time and investment that all parties have made in the process, then your efforts will have been a total waste of time, and the organization will lose its credibility and respect. There must be some Measurable accomplishment.

6. Partnerships

If you want to create partnerships based on shared Benefits and mutual respect, then you must be as diverse in programming as you want your audience to be. This can be difficult. Artistic directors, producers, presenters have a certain mindset about the type of cultural product they want to bring to their audiences. I have found it challenging to get them to listen to and act upon the tastes of new audiences because they are more comfortable and familiar with traditional art and culture supporters. However, we're talking about expanding the base of our institutions to embrace non-traditional audiences. If you ask them, the audience can and will tell you what they like. The ideal programming represents a cultural product for new audiences, as well as the traditional offerings.

7. Educating the audience and artists

Audience development also means educating your artists and audiences. We have to take on the role as educators. I'm not referring to the wonderful arts and education programs that exist in some schools and community centers. I'm referring to designing systems that inform your artists and audience about your vision. It means building Support based on shared interests. To educate artists means to share the vision of your institution so that they become aware of the larger picture. We're talking about changing the way arts and culture are moving through and are embraced by society; therefore, we need everyone's input.

8. Building the bridge

Suppose you hear about a party being held every week, but you are not invited. From the buzz around town, the party is the hip place to be. Even though you are not given a formal invitation, you decide to go because you like to party. When you get there, even though it is interesting and exciting, you feel awkward. You are self-conscious. You wonder whether the hosts are whispering about why you are there. You wonder if other guests know you weren't invited. No one speaks to you or acknowledges your presence. For many audiences previously excluded from arts institutions - whether the exclusion is conscious or unconscious is not the issue - the experience is very similar. There is a party - an art opening, a dance concert, a theater production - and they were not invited. It doesn't matter that your display advertisements appeared in the New York Times, Los Angeles Times or Chicago Tribune. What really matters is when your audience crosses the bridge you've built through your partnerships, and accepts your specially targeted invitation to attend an event at your venue--this is just as important as the targeted advertising. That's why

making audience development an institutional vision is a critical component of its success.

9. Creating Value

Audience development is not charity work. Rather, we are talking about how to make arts and culture accessible to everyone and how to attack the existing Barriers that have for years systematically and subtly denied access. We are not building audiences simply to increase earned income. Creating Value is not always reflected dollar-for-dollar in a changed bottom line. While that ultimately is the goal, initially the effort is to open the doors to our institutions and work to collaborate on programs that diverse audiences want to see. That is what will help keep the doors open.

10. Expressing appreciation

Noted author Henry James once wrote:

*"Three things in life are important.
The first is to be kind.
The second is to be kind.
The third is to be kind."*

It all comes down to the little things we do. In our efforts to build new audiences, expressing appreciation is even more important. What do we appreciate? Everything and everybody. When one is magnanimous, when there is a true generosity of spirit, it opens the door for a flow of mutual respect, and a willingness to Support your efforts.

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